

SCARRON'S NOUVELLES TRAGICOMIQUES

by Philip A. Wadsworth

Nous apercevons, par delà les gaucheries de la manière de Scarron, poindre le roman moderne, véritable enquête organisée sur la société. . . . Scarron est déjà un "naturaliste", si l'on me permet de prendre ce mot dans une acception beaucoup plus large que celle de la polémique contemporaine. Aucune étude n'est plus intéressante que celle de ce procédé naturaliste à ses débuts. Prendre un volume de la *Comédie humaine* en même temps qu'un volume du *Roman comique*, passer d'une page du premier à une page du second, comparer les descriptions, les scènes, le dialogue, les caractères, c'est proprement saisir à plein le point de départ et le point d'arrivée de la même méthode littéraire. . . .

Paul Bourget, Préface, *Le Roman comique*

It seems appropriate on this occasion to approach our subject by making a detour to the nineteenth century and Balzac. When Paul Bourget was invited to write a preface for an edition of *Le Roman comique*, in 1880, he took the opportunity to defend the achievements of realism and naturalism. Hence his unexpected comparison of Scarron's novel, which he called the "premier essai de roman exact," and Balzac's clinically precise studies of French psychology and manners in *La Comédie humaine*. He alludes particularly to *Eugénie Grandet* and *Le Curé de Tours*, stressing Balzac's ability to explain the causes of human passion and the interaction between man and his environment. Scarron's work was necessarily more superficial, he claims, since science had not advanced very far in his day, but *Le Roman comique* still deserved to be called a realistic, almost documentary novel. Bourget commends it for its "unclassical" subject — the adventures of a troupe of actors visiting a provincial city — for the sharp visual qualities of its descriptive passages, and for the unforgettable vitality of certain characters: "ce sieur de La Rappinière, qui était le rieur de la ville du Mans, ce pince-sans-rire de La Rancune, le monstrueux Ragotin. . . ." The novel's main fault is its "manque absolu d'unité" but even its disconnected incidents and jumble of unresolved plots help to create an impression of real life.

Although Bourget's parallel between Scarron and Balzac is rather strained, he shows a perceptive appreciation for many features of *Le Roman comique*. He fails to do justice, however, to the four *nouvelles*, all of them drawn from

Mr. Wadsworth is Professor Emeritus of French at Rice University.

Spanish sources, which Scarron inserted casually and almost at random in his novel. Bourget makes a favorable comment on one of them, *L'Amante invisible* — which is indeed a charming fantasy of mystery and romance — but he disposes of the four stories very briefly, with a graceful flourish: “Même les nouvelles espagnoles, qui de ci, de là, passent leur tête coiffée d’une mantille à travers les fenêtres des hasardeuses hôtelleries du Maine, ne sont pas sans un attrait de simplicité délicate.”¹ Simplicity and delicacy are strange terms to apply to these complex tales of passion and adventure, and one suspects that Bourget disliked them and did not even read them attentively. It is not surprising that a nineteenth-century critic, accustomed to the masterful short stories of such writers as Balzac, Mérimée, and Maupassant, should feel uneasy in the presence of the rather archaic and unsophisticated *nouvelles* in *Le Roman comique*, particularly when they seemed to be Spanish rather than French. Today we have a different and perhaps better understanding of Scarron’s art as a storyteller, as a result of recent efforts in historical and literary scholarship.

We should remember that Scarron, who died before he could complete his novel, published the first two parts of it in 1651 and 1657, at a time when long heroic romances were just beginning to lose their grip on the reading public and shorter forms of fiction, usually called *nouvelles*, were about to emerge as a distinctive and authentically French literary genre. Investigators have probed the origins and the development of the *nouvelle* in France, together with the foreign influences affecting it — notably the tales of Boccaccio and the Spanish *novela* — and have studied the technique of Sorel, Segrais, and other individual writers. The most important contributions are the collection of papers published in 1966 by the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises, the brief but penetrating book by Frédéric Deloffre on the classical French *nouvelle* (1967), and in 1970 René Godenne’s exhaustive *Histoire de la nouvelle française aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*.² Scarron, of course, has always been a well-known literary figure because of his comedies and burlesque poems, as well as his novel, but his *nouvelles* did not receive much scholarly attention until 1933. In a study of the *novelas* of Cervantes and their influence in France, Hainsworth devoted some important pages to Scarron’s Spanish sources and his manner of translating and revising them. The work of Hainsworth led to a similar treatment by Dédéyan, and finally to Cadorel’s line-by-line comparison of the French texts and the Spanish originals: *Scarron et la nouvelle espagnole dans le Roman comique*.³

Although based on Spanish *novelas* (by Castillo Salórzano and María de Zayas) the four *nouvelles* in *Le Roman comique* can no longer be called mere translations. Scarron often copied whole pages quite faithfully and generally retained most of the *romanesque* elements in his models, but he sometimes made sweeping changes, eliminating certain sub-plots and minor characters, introducing an occasional new scene, or revising the order of events. Many

of his alterations are matters of detail — gestures, speeches, emotional reactions — and show a predilection for what is vivid and natural. On the other hand he keeps intervening with ironic comments, pleasantries, and witty allusions which tend to burlesque the serious and heroic aspects of the stories. His personal charm bubbles to the surface, almost in the manner of La Fontaine in his fables and tales. And, like La Fontaine and other classical writers, he makes use of borrowed materials which he transforms in a highly original way.

What has been said here concerning Scarron's methods of composition in the four *nouvelles* of *Le Roman comique* seems to apply equally well to his five other stories, all of Spanish origin, which he grouped under the title *Nouvelles tragicomiques*. These began appearing individually in 1655 and in collective editions in 1657. They were reprinted many times in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but, unlike *Le Roman comique*, they have fallen into neglect, almost oblivion.⁴ Most readers are not acquainted with them at all and, with the exception of Hainsworth who has compared them briefly with their Spanish sources, few scholars have looked at them closely.⁵ My intention here is to provide a very simple analysis of them in the hope that they will become better known and attract further research. The five "tragicomic" *nouvelles* are every bit as interesting as those in *Le Roman comique*.

For ease of reference it will be useful to list the titles of Scarron's *nouvelles* and of their Spanish sources. Since there is some question about the chronology of composition and publication of Scarron's stories, they are simply given here in the order in which they appear in the edition of 1786:

La Précaution inutile. Zayas, *El Prevenido engañado*.

Les Hypocrites. Salas Barbadillo, *La Hija de Celestina*.

L'Adultère innocent. Zayas, *Al fin se paga todo*.

Plus d'effets que de paroles. Tirso de Molina, *Palabras y Plumas*.

Le Châtiment de l'avarice. Zayas, *El Castigo de la miseria*.

The Spanish writers, whom various Hispanists have studied, need only the briefest mention here. The three stories by María de Zayas (as well as the one which Scarron utilized in *Le Roman comique*) are all to be found in her collection of 1637, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*. One of the many authors of more-or-less exemplary *novelas* who followed in the wake of Cervantes, María de Zayas was inclined to be a defender of women's rights. Her feminism may have had some special appeal for the *précieuses* in Scarron's audience. *La Hija de Celestina* (1612) by Salas Barbadillo also shows didactic intentions but belongs mainly to the picaresque tradition; the heroine is a *femme fatale* and a resourceful criminal. A more unusual source, belonging to the theater, is Tirso de Molina's *Palabras y Plumas* (1615?) a play which inspired imitations in story form by both Scarron and Boisrobert.⁶ In France this heroic, romantic *comedia* would have been called a tragicomedy, which

may help to account for the title which Scarron gave to his collection of stories, arising from an awareness of similarities between dramatic and fictional genres.

Scarron of course took many liberties with Tirso de Molina's play when he rewrote it to produce his *nouvelle*, *Plus d'effets que de paroles* (vol. III, pp. 367-420). He suppressed many incidents, invented a few new ones, and turned a sinister traitor (Prosper) into a distinctly comical maniac. Prosper, a middle aged Italian prince, is engaged to marry a sweet young princess, Matilde, who has accepted him dutifully, even affectionately. He is arrogant and thoroughly dishonest but he has persuasive social graces. He repeatedly deceives and humiliates his fiancée until eventually she finds happiness with a long-suffering nobleman, Hypolite, who has undergone many misfortunes and has saved her life on several occasions. Some secondary love plots complicate the action and at the end a triple marriage is required to solve all the problems. Along the way there are various time-honored *romanesque* situations — a tournament, a duel, a shipwreck, encounters with bandits and pirates. Scarron presents his material rather seriously and realistically, for the most part, but he has a tendency to parody Tirso's chivalric and sentimental love themes. He introduces a satirical portrait of Prosper, for example, rounding it out with a burlesque epitaph in verse (p. 369). As the story reaches a ceremonial climax — with the principal characters arriving on horseback before the King of Naples, who is about to make the marriage announcements — Scarron pauses to describe everyone's physical discomfort caused by the scorching sun, the dust, and countless hungry flies (p. 416). Anything heroic or solemn is likely to be deflated suddenly and turned into comedy.

Among the *nouvelles* which Scarron derived from María de Zayas, one had a comic potential which impressed Molière and helped to inspire *L'Ecole des femmes*. *La Précaution inutile* (vol. III, pp. 233-280) needs very little discussion since it is already well known to scholars who have worked on Molière's sources. It provided the playwright with the central pattern of his comedy, the relationship between Arnolphe and Agnès. *La Précaution inutile* is a thesis-story about a Spanish nobleman, Dom Pèdre, who is repeatedly deceived by clever, cynical women. He comes to believe that only a simple, uneducated wife can remain faithful, and he eventually marries a girl whom he has had raised in a convent, with no knowledge of the world. But she soon learns about love from a handsome young stranger, proving that ignorance alone is no guarantee of virtuous conduct. Scarron treats the moral theme rather casually, shows obvious relish for the licentious episodes leading to Dom Pèdre's disillusionment, and often switches from seriousness to a tone of banter and burlesque.

L'Adultère innocent (vol. III, pp. 329-366), also taken from María de Zayas, opens with a scene at night in the streets of Valladolid. A nobleman named Dom Garcias comes to the rescue of a beautiful woman in distress, Eugénie,

who then proceeds to tell him the story of her downfall. After her marriage to a certain Dom Sanche she became attracted to a wealthy courtier from Portugal and almost surrendered to his blandishments. In fact she tried to have an affair with him but bad luck kept spoiling their plans (and saving her virtue). Meanwhile her husband's brother, who lived in the house next door, was making efforts to seduce her and he finally succeeded, coming to her bedroom at night disguised as Dom Sanche. Thus her guilty project failed but she became an innocent victim of adultery. She was able to punish her seducer, stabbing him with her husband's dagger, and had to flee from home. Then, in a later series of adventures, Dom Garcias kills the Portuguese philanderer in a duel and Dom Sanche dies of grief. At the end Dom Garcias, a model of constancy, declares his love to Eugénie and they are happily married. The *novela* by María de Zayas has an underlying moral theme, that sin is always punished, which disappears in Scarron's rendering of it. He makes very few changes in the plot but he is inclined to stress its irony, and he relieves the grayness of the story by offering several joking comments on Spanish life and customs.

Le Châtiment de l'avarice (vol. III, pp. 421-443) is a very amusing rogue story. Dom Marcos, a poor, ambitious page boy, improves his rank and his fortune through extreme self-denial and almost squalid avarice. At the age of forty he decides to marry and courts a woman named Isidore, who passes for a rich and attractive widow. They are married and on the wedding night Isidore turns out to be a woman of sixty who has altered her appearance with false teeth and a wig. She is also an accomplished thief and is abetted in her schemes by a young crony, Augustinet, who poses as her nephew. The plot soon turns into a pursuit, with Dom Marcos trying to find the thieves and regain his stolen money. Scarron adds some details to the caricature of Marcos, makes joking comments as he tells the story, and changes the ending. In the text of María de Zayas, Isidora sends Marcos a scornful letter which enrages him and causes him to die prematurely; thus he is punished for his avarice. Then Isidora pays for her sins; she is robbed by Agustínico and is reduced to begging on the streets of Madrid. In Scarron's version Marcos catches up with the thieves as they are about to embark on a ship. When his strongbox full of money is being hoisted on board he clutches at it and it falls on his head. Scarron adds that "le coffre . . . l'enfonça au fond de la mer ou, si vous voulez, à tous les mille diables." In the scuffle Augustinet fights with a sailor and is knocked overboard, whereupon: "Il se prit en tombant à Isidore, qui ne se prit à rien, et ainsi accompagna son cher Augustinet." The only survivor is Isidore's maid, Inez, who travels on the ship to Naples where "elle mourut en courtisane, c'est à dire à l'hôpital." This cascade of disasters, recounted so gaily, becomes something fanciful and ridiculous; we are urged not to take the events at all seriously.

Les Hypocrites (vol. III, pp. 281-328), based on *La Hija de Celestina*, is

another story which may have attracted the attention of Molière. It seems to have given him the idea for a situation in *Tartuffe*, the scene where the impostor escapes exposure by telling the truth to Orgon and begging to be punished for his crimes (Act III, sc. 6). The main characters of *Les Hypocrites* are cold-blooded scoundrels, a beautiful adventuress named Hélène and her male accomplice, Montufar. They are shown first in a scheme of impersonation and extortion, obtaining money from the family of a certain Dom Sanche. After some narrow escapes they disguise themselves as pious pilgrims and make their way to Seville. It is here that Montufar, wearing a clerical costume, plays his Tartuffian role and fools people so successfully. Hélène and Montufar distrust one another; they fight on several occasions and even try to kill each other. Nevertheless, they are married for a while, as a business arrangement between pimp and prostitute, until Montufar is murdered by one of Hélène's visitors. Their sordid relationship is one of the impressive features of this *nouvelle*. Another is a story of love, or rather lust, which holds it together. Dom Sanche is attracted by the beauty of Hélène but she keeps eluding him. He does not know that she is a criminal and that she has been blackmailing his uncle. In the Spanish text this plot is unresolved and Salas Barbadillo allows justice to triumph: the heroine poisons Montufar and is put to death for her crime. But Scarron changes the outcome, giving it an ironic twist. Hélène flees from the police and encounters Dom Sanche, who is about to sail for the Indies to establish a new colony. She tells him a pack of lies and he invites her to join him on his voyage. Then, as Scarron concludes, "Dom Sanche et Hélène allèrent heureusement aux Indes, où il leur est arrivé des aventures qui ne peuvent tenir dans un si petit volume, et que je promets au public, sous le titre de la *Parfaite courtisane* ou de *Lais moderne*, pour peu qu'il témoigne avoir envie de les apprendre." Scarron failed to provide this sequel but at least he terminated the picaresque career of Hélène with a characteristically humorous ending.

In quoting the final lines of *Le Châtiment de l'avarice* and *Les Hypocrites* I have hoped to convey Scarron's frivolous attitude toward his Spanish materials. In both cases he suppressed some of the didactic passages which were supposed to make these sordid *novelas* wholesome and beneficial. He even eliminated events which might be tragic or painful, or else rendered them in a preposterous way so as to provide some laughter for his readers. Relating stories which he meant to be readily enjoyable, he was apparently guided by an esthetic principle like that of La Fontaine in his *contes* and which the poet explained in his preface of 1666: an effort to achieve an air of naturalness and negligence, a spicy dose "du piquant et de l'agréable," and an avoidance of sadness in order to "apprêter des plaisirs sans peine." He has little of La Fontaine's graceful charm and he is far more inclined toward exaggeration and caricature, but the two authors possess many traits in common as writers of fiction.

Another example, the concluding sentence of *L'Adultère innocent*, has even more to teach us concerning Scarron's conception of his work. He relates quite soberly the marriage of Eugénie and Dom Garcias, adds a joking tribute to the husband's virility, and then finally: "Ils eurent beaucoup d'enfants, parce qu'ils eurent grand soin d'en faire; et l'on conte encore aujourd'hui en Espagne leur histoire, que je vous donne pour vraie, comme on me l'a donnée." In one breath he makes fun of his story and in the next he insists on its veracity. Recalling the extraordinary situations in *L'Adultère innocent* one wonders how much Scarron was concerned with *vraisemblance* and *vérité*. Literary historians, aware that seventeenth-century "realistic" fiction was a counter-current to the vast tide of sentimental and heroic novels, have been inclined to exaggerate what seems to be truthful reporting of everyday life by such writers as Scarron (and Sorel and Furetière). But Scarron showed only a limited interest in verisimilitude. He occasionally improved the structural logic of his Spanish models, filling in gaps to show the continuity of events or eliminating certain digressions which strayed too far afield. And, as we have seen, he had a gift for concrete descriptive details and for the notation of movements and gestures. On the other hand, he accepted and liked to combine many kinds of themes and situations, both exalted and trivial, whether or not they were faithful to life, and in treating them he often indulged his taste for comedy and burlesque.

The "truth" of Scarron might better be called the ring of truth. It comes less from his subject matter than from his craftsmanship. His stories carry conviction; he sweeps his readers along and causes them to surrender to an illusion. His natural, conversational style, his moments of intimacy, his skillful changes of pace, his humorous exaggerations, all these features of his art ally him with his audience in a bond of complicity. He seems to be saying to us: "Let's play a game, let's make believe. Here is an exciting Spanish *novela* which we can enjoy together. The author claims that these adventures really happened, and we may as well think so too; true or not, they are easy to imagine."

The stories of *Les Nouvelles tragicomiques*, pitched at a lower level than those in *Le Roman comique*, take place in a world where nobility and honor are rather rare, a world dominated by ambition, cruelty, avarice, and lust. The author depicts the characters and their adventures sharply and realistically, to be sure, but unsystematically and without any of the sustained objectivity usually associated with realism and naturalism. If Paul Bourget had read these five stories he might have been reminded, once again, of the novels of Balzac. And he might have pointed out again, quite rightly, Scarron's indifference to profound psychological and environmental forces. My own inclination has been to compare Scarron's handling of Spanish materials with that of La Fontaine in reworking the tales of Boccaccio. There are many differences between Scarron and La Fontaine, but they worked within a few

years of one another, they had the same cultural heritage and they were trying to please the same literary public. Both of them were masters of style and literary technique and they had similar approaches to esthetic problems. They wanted to get away from chivalry and sentimentality. They saw the need for exploiting foreign sources and they sought out lively, stimulating stories — romantically exaggerated but not beyond belief — which they proceeded to retell in a lighthearted way, with all the artistic resources at their command. To appreciate *Les Nouvelles tragicomiques* it is important to view them in their seventeenth-century context. They enjoyed great popularity throughout the classical period and beyond and, in ways still to be determined, they must have exerted a significant influence on the further development of French fiction.

NOTES

1. For quotations from Paul Bourget see his preface to *Le Roman comique*, ed. D. Jouast, 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1880), I, xxviii–xxxii.

2. *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises*, 18 (1966); Frédéric Deloffre, *La Nouvelle en France à l'âge classique* (Paris: Didier, 1967); René Godenne, *Histoire de la nouvelle française aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Geneva: Droz, 1970).

3. G. Hainsworth, *Les "Novelas exemplares" de Cervantes en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1933), pp. 171–193; Charles Dédéyan, *Le Roman comique de Scarron* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1959?); R. Cadorel, *Scarron et la nouvelle espagnole dans le Roman comique* (Aix-en-Provence: La Pensée Universitaire, 1960).

4. For details of publication see Emile Magne, *Bibliographie générale des oeuvres de Scarron* (Paris: Giraud-Badin, 1924). My references to *Les Nouvelles tragicomiques* are in volume 3 of Scarron, *Œuvres*, 7 vols. (Paris: Bastien, 1786).

5. See Hainsworth, pp. 183–193, and also his article "New Details on the nouvelles of Scarron and Boisrobert," *Bulletin hispanique*, 49 (1947), 145–169.

6. Scarron's sources are available in modern editions: María de Zayas y Sotomayor, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, ed. Agustín G. de Amezcua (Madrid: Aldus, 1948); Alonso J. de Salas Barbadillo, *La Hija de Celestina*, in *La Novela picaresca española*, ed. Angel Valbuena y Prat (Madrid: Aguilar, 1966), pp. 889–919; Tirso de Molina, *Obras dramáticas completas*, ed. Blanca de los Ríos, 3 vols. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1946–48), I, 1281–1336.